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NATIONAL SECURITY WARNING SYSTEM INTEGRATED WITH BUILDING
FIRE ALARM NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

10 RELATED APPLICATION(S)

This application claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/502,337, filed September 12, 2003. The entire teachings of the above application(s) are incorporated herein by reference.

15 BACKGROUND

Recently, U.S. Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge announced a soon-to-be-deployed national terrorism alert system whose goal is to provide a "unified warning apparatus that is universally understood. It has been proposed that the alarms would be broadcast over National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) radios and 20 would signal alert conditions - in descending order of urgency - of: critical, serious, alert and ready.

According to published information, the system would be used to alert state and local police and emergency personnel. According a report broadcast by National Public Radio on Feb. 15, 2002, the state of South Dakota has purchased 5,000 weather radios 25 and is distributing them to universities, hospitals, law enforcement agencies and day care centers to provide a means of public emergency notification.

One advantage of the NOAA weather radios is that they turn themselves on when an alert is broadcast, increasing the likelihood that they will be noticed.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention extends the concept of a national warning alert proposal by incorporating a NOAA weather radio receiver into, or interfacing a NOAA weather radio receiver with, a building fire alarm system. Because code-compliant fire alarm panels are already equipped with voice and/or audio and visual notification appliances, they provide a ready means with which to notify building occupants of a national alert.

In accordance with the present invention, a fire alarm system includes a fire alarm notification appliance, and a warning detector which detects a warning alert from an external source. The fire alarm notification appliance provides notification of the warning alert in response to detection of the warning alert or a change in the status of the warning alert.

The external source may be, but is not limited to, a government agency, such as the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The warning detector may be a radio receiver equipped to receive the warning alert, such as a NOAA weather radio receiver, and may be, for example, integrated with a system controller or fire alarm control panel. Alternatively, the warning detector may comprise a component that interfaces to a NOAA weather radio receiver, for example, via relay contacts that open (or close) upon detection of a warning alert, or via a serial or some other data interface.

In alternate embodiments, the warning detector may receive warning alerts via means other than radio; for example, via the Internet, via telephone or via cellular phone. Other means of communication can also be used.

In one embodiment, a fire alarm notification appliance provides notification of the detected warning alert by transmitting a voice message. Alternatively, a notification appliance could provide notification by transmitting a predefined audio pattern, or by flashing a predefined strobe pattern. Different notifications, such as different voiced messages, or different horn patterns, can be used for different warning alerts.

Delay and verification modules, which may comprise hardware or software or both, and which may be integrated with the system controller, can provide respectively a delay before transmission of the notification warning, and means for allowing

confirmation of the validity of the warning alert before transmission of the notification, for example by authorized personnel.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5 The foregoing and other objects, features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the following more particular description of preferred embodiments of the invention, as illustrated in the accompanying drawings in which like reference characters refer to the same parts throughout the different views. The drawings are not necessarily to scale, emphasis instead being placed upon illustrating the principles of the invention.

10 Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram illustrating an alarm system embodying the present invention.

Fig. 2 is a flowchart illustrating the steps implemented by a particular embodiment of the present invention.

15 DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

A description of preferred embodiments of the invention follows.

20 The present invention extends the concept of a national warning alert proposal by incorporating a NOAA weather radio receiver into, or interfacing a NOAA weather radio receiver with, a building fire alarm system. Because code-compliant fire alarm panels are already equipped with voice and/or audio and visual notification appliances, they provide a ready means with which to notify building occupants of a national alert. Code-compliant fire alarm panels are also equipped with battery backup power. In the event that normal AC power is lost, the panel can still transmit the notification.

25 For example, a national alert signal transmitted to a NOAA weather radio that is interfaced to a fire alarm system causes the fire panel, which has been pre-programmed to respond to the alert, to transmit a voice message to the occupants of the building. Such a message might be: "Attention! Attention! A security alert has been received from the National Homeland Security Department." Then, depending upon the level of the alert condition, the panel broadcasts an appropriate message. For example:

30 "A critical security alert has been received. Immediately implement response plan 1."

OR

"A ready security alert has been received. No action is required at this time. Stay tuned for further information."

5 In non-voice fire alarm systems, the notification horns and strobes could be programmed to signal building occupants using pre-defined patterns, *e.g.*, temporal code. Training and drills will be needed to ensure that occupants will understand the various security alerts.

10 Such an alert system could be retrofit to most existing fire alarm systems with relatively little expense, enabling the government to notify a vast number of citizens quickly in a national emergency. The system could be put into place quickly and with a relatively small investment.

Implementation can be accomplished in several ways, including but not limited to the following:

15 1) The NOAA radio can be directly incorporated as a module within a fire panel;

or

2) The NOAA radio can be interfaced to the fire panel via relay contacts; or

3) The NOAA radio can be interfaced to the fire panel through a serial interface device that translates the alert signal into a recognizable command to the fire alarm panel.

20 Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram illustrating an alarm system embodying the present invention. The system may include one or more detector networks 12 having individual fire or smoke detectors D which are monitored by a system controller / fire alarm panel 14. When a fire or smoke alarm condition is sensed, the fire alarm panel 14 signals the alarm through at least one network 16 of alarm indicators, also called notification appliances. The notification appliances may include any variety of audible alarms A and light strobe alarms S.

An external NOAA receiver 30 is shown receiving a warning alert signal 42 broadcast from an NOAA transmitting station 40. A circuit performing the NOAA receiver function could also be incorporated directly into the system controller 14.

30 The system controller 14, which may be, for example, a fire alarm panel, is programmed to respond to the NOAA warning alert signal 42 with a series of pre-defined

actions. For example, if an alert is received, a general announcement is played; if the alert level is “critical,” then some particular message designated with that alert level is played.

Code-compliant fire alarm panels are typically equipped with a battery backup system 18. In the event that normal AC power is lost, the fire alarm panel 14 can still transmit a notification.

The idea can be extended to include transmission of warning signals from other state or local government agencies, *e.g.*, the old Emergency Broadcast System or the newer Emergency Alert System. Media other than the NOAA weather radio can also transmit such signals. For example, an alert signal can be transmitted via the Internet, telephone, cellular phone, or other media to a fire panel equipped to receive such signals.

Fig. 2 is a flowchart 50 illustrating the steps implemented by a particular embodiment of the present invention. At step 51, a warning alert from an external source such as the U.S. NOAA, or some other government agency (although the invention is not limited only to government sources) is detected.

To prevent false alarms or panic situations, an embodiment of the present invention can, at step 53, incorporate a fixed or variable delay to the retransmission of the alert signal within the building for some pre-determined time period to give local building authorities time to confirm the validity of the received warning signal.

Finally, at step 55, the system announces, through voice or non-voice means, the warning alert.

Fig. 3 is a schematic diagram of a visual annunciator 61 of an embodiment of the present invention which can give a continuous indication of the alert level. The visual annunciator has several visual indicators, *e.g.*, lights or LEDs, which are preferably color-coded and correspond to the various emergency levels defined by the NOAA or other agency. The annunciator 61 may be integrated with or mounted on the fire control panel, or may stand as a separate unit apart from, but in communication with, the fire control panel. Five visual indicators are shown in Fig. 3 for illustrative purposes; however, one skilled in the art would recognize that a visual annunciator with a different number of visual indicators would fall within the scope of the present invention.

While this invention has been particularly shown and described with references to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that various changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the scope of the invention encompassed by the appended claims.

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